A WOMAN'S ENCHANTMENT

By William Le Queux

(Continued.)

For a long time neither of us dare tamper with the kitchen window, but at last Cunliffe summoned courage, and while I prepared for escape back over the wall if necessary, he inserted his knife between the sashes.

The latch would not budge. With strained ears we listened for the noise of a gong within. Fortunately the silence remained unbroken, and a few moments later I heard a sharp click. The catch had sprung back.

Then slowly—very slowly—the journalist lifted the sash, and a few seconds later we had both slipped through into the house.

I pressed the button of my hand-lamp, and a narrow stream of white light shot across the spacious kitchen.

We were actually within the stronghold of a great and resourceful criminal, who was the enemy of my well beloved, as well as that of my dearest friend.

CHAPTER XXX.

What We Found at Bolton Street.

Slowly, and with infinite caution, we both crept forth into the stone passage, and up a flight of narrow, uncarpeted stairs.

Each creak sent a thrill of terror through me. The noise made in that ascent seemed terrific in the dead silence of the night.

At last we found ourselves in the hall, with a thick Turkey carpet beneath our feet. On the left a door stood open, and with a flash from my lamp I saw it was the dining room. Behind was a small alcove furnished in eastern style and used as a smoking room, while behind us were the stairs, rather narrow, but with carpet so thick that we had no necessity for placing the socks over our shoes.

Ascending to the first floor, we found that the drawing room and the adjoining room at the back had been turned into a spacious and well furnished library—with all the appearance of the den of a studious man. From floor to ceiling it was lined with books, and here and there a cozy corner, with a seat for the reader, secluded from draughts.

As I flashed my light around, I saw that in the center stood a large writing table, upon which was a big silver bowl full of Marechal Niel roses. On the floor, lying unfolded, was a large map of Europe.

"Dare we switch on the light?" asked Cunliffe in a whisper, as he still stood near the door.

I replied in the affirmative, and a few seconds later the apartment was suddenly flooded with a soft mellow light, cunningly arranged behind the bookcases.

A fine and yet reposeful retreat was there revealed, just such a room as would appeal to the student, the standing desk, the red leather reading chair and the typewriter. Rufford, the man whose penmanship was unequaled in the kingdom, was a man of refined tastes. Unlike most criminals, he could lead a quiet, unobtrusive life when necessary, and pose as the learned studious man in round gold-rimmed spectacles.

Near the big fireplace, before which stood an old-fashioned screen of embroidered silk, was a lady's chair, where the pale green cushion crushed back showed a recent occupant. His fair visitor—the young woman who worked in the Soho laundry—had sat there.

The odor of an excellent cigar still clung to the place, and on a side table was a half-emptied bottle of Evian water and a glass, for the occupier of that house was, I knew, a teetotaler.

The big mahogany writing table, however, attracted me. It was spick and span, with silver inkstand and unsullied blotting pad.

I tried the drawers, but all were locked.

"Let's pry them open," suggested my companion, and next moment he commenced operations with his iron bar.

It was dangerous work, for the noise he made seemed to my excited hearing tremendous. The drawers, however, did not yield, or rather he grew frightened, such a cracking of wood did he make. Therefore we went in work upon them with the bunches of our own keys. One of Cunliffe's, fortunately, fitted, and in a few moments the whole seven were unlocked.

They, however, proved disappointing. In the center drawer were a few rather fine old miniatures, for Garshore was a man of antiquarian tastes and had a habit of picking up trifles on his erratic wanderings. The next, turned over by my companion, contained only embossed stationery. In the next were a couple of balls of string and some sealing wax, a cheque book and a few other odds and ends. One drawer I opened was crammed full of newspaper cuttings. I saw that they related to the strange adventures of Willoughby, alias Rufford, the story of which had, I remember, appeared in the papers two or three years before.

That drawer I closed quickly away from the sharp eyes of my companion. In the others were only a few unimportant letters, mostly in French and German, from acquaintances abroad.

And this quiet room filled with books, all so unostentatious and yet so elegant, so businesslike and yet so restful, the home of one of the most remarkable scoundrels of modern times!

I gazed around full of curiosity and at the same time full of disappointment. We had taken all that trouble and run all that risk—for nothing.

I made a tour of the bookcases and on the opposite side of the room came upon two nests of drawers. These we examined, but found nothing of a suspicious nature. While we were thus engaged, however, a noise caused us to halt suddenly and hold our breaths. Some one was moving in the room above! Had we disturbed the owner of the place?

The room above was no doubt the best bedroom, and there Garshore slept, without a doubt. Voices sounded there.

Cunliffe sprang across to the door and switched off the light silently, leaving us in total darkness, save for a faint gray glimmer through the blinds. The person above seemed to be stumbling about, while at the same time a very curious odor greeted our nostrils—a smell that I had never before experienced.

"That's curious!" remarked Cunliffe, sniffing quickly. "I hope the place isn't on fire!"

I took a long breath, and it certainly did seem like something burning unpleasantly. Suddenly both our hearts gave a great bound, for we heard the faint sound of an electric bell ringing somewhere in an upper floor.

He was giving the alarm!

"What shall we do?" asked my friend in quick alarm.

"Stay here," I said, firmly, "and face the music. What a pity we haven't a weapon with us."

But Cunliffe grasped his iron bolt and expressed his intention of felling without a word the first person who entered the place. So we waited, and presently heard the sound of slippered feet followed by the mumble of voices above. Then there was a loud knocking, as though a fire was being started.

At last all became quiet again, the silence unbroken save for the ticking of our watches, until presently we ventured to move again.

I had flashed on my hand-lamp, as we moved into the adjoining room, also a library, when of a sudden the ray of light shone upon a small table in the corner, and I saw upon it a large silver frame. In it was a photograph.

Involuntarily I uttered a low cry, for the photograph standing there was that of Elfrida Maynard—the pale-faced girl who lived within that man's thralldom!

"You know her!" whispered the journalist, as I crossed quickly to the table and took up her picture to examine it more closely by the light of my lamp. "Who is she?"

"A—a friend of mine," I stammered. "I had no idea that I should see her picture in this house." It was a beautiful portrait, showing her in evening bodice, with roses in her hair, and a smile upon those sweet lips that I so longed to kiss.

And he, heartless, scheming scoundrel that he was, kept there enshrined the picture of the girl he had so shamefully deceived!

I had replaced it upon the table with a sigh, and was sweeping the room with my tiny lamp, which shed a long streak of white brilliance, when there became suddenly revealed a small keyhole in the paneling of the archway between the two rooms. Folding doors had once existed there, no doubt. These had been removed, and oak paneling placed upon the dividing wall, which was about eighteen inches in thickness. A panel, one about eighteen inches square, had, it seemed, been cut out so as to form a small cupboard, which would escape the notice of any one not in search of the keyhole. The latter was, indeed, placed in such a position that had it not been for my bright little searchlight I should certainly never have noticed it.

Crossing to it, I examined it more closely. Its unobtrusiveness attracted me. Moreover, I saw by the keyhole that it was secured by a patent lock.

Cunliffe took in the situation at a glance and switched on the light. Then came to my side, saying, as he tapped the panel:

"Something may be inside here."

The sound emitted was not very hollow, and we came to the conclusion that the oak panel was lined with steel, so as to form a tiny safe. So well, indeed, did the wooden door fit that it was quite apparent that it was used to secrete papers from prying visitors.

In a few moments, therefore, we were at work upon it with the iron bar, the flattened end of which, however, was too blunt to enter the crack until I had succeeded in cutting away a portion of the woodwork with my knife.

At last, however, Cunliffe wedged it in near the lock. Then we held our breath. To prize it open in that way must result in considerable noise.

Still, there was no other means. So I motioned to my companion to bear upon it. He did so—but it would not budge. That tiny lock, it seemed, secured some complicated mechanism cunningly contrived to resist all illegal effort.

I assisted him, grasping the bolt with both hands, and, placing my feet against the wall, pulled with all my weight. The leverage must have been tremendous, for there was a loud cracking of wood, and yet we only succeeded in wrenching the panel from its lining. The little steel door still remained intact.

We stood together, our ears strained for signs of movement above. The noise seemed to us to have resounded through the house.

All was, however, silent. There was no movement in the bedroom above. Yet the curious odor had become perceptibly stronger—an odor which seemed decidedly chemical. This greatly puzzled us both.

The moments we waited inactive seemed hours, until we at last recommenced our efforts upon the little door, and presently succeeded, after exerting all our strength, in breaking the lock.

Within was a small cavity, with a single shelf, upon which lay a few papers. As they were no doubt Garshore's private documents, they would, I felt certain, reveal at least some of his secrets.

There were several loose letters, together with a small roll of brown, time-stained parchment, all of which I quickly seized and transferred to my pockets, leaving nothing whatever within.

Cunliffe closed the door swiftly, replaced the panel carefully, picked up the two or three splinters of wood from the carpet and threw them into the fireplace.

Then with thumping hearts we switched off the light and crept noiselessly out and down the stairs, escaping into the dawn by the way we came.

I carried in my pocket along Piccadilly the secrets of the blackguard who held within his unscrupulous grasp my best friend and my innocent well beloved.

CHAPTER XXXI.

Some Astounding Documents.

That afternoon was gray and overcast.

In a small front sitting room in a house in Scarsdale Villas, Kensington, I was seated with an elderly, bald-headed, rather undersized man, named Greaves, who had been recommended to me by the keeper of medieval manuscripts at the British Museum as an expert paleographist. With heavy, steel-rimmed spectacles on his nose, he was seated at his table near the window, intent in his examination of the three yellow dusty parchments which I had submitted to him. They were written in brown, half-faded ink, in a crabbed hand, of which I could decipher scarcely a single word.

While I sat in silence at his side he had been pouring over line after line, apparently deeply interested in what he had read.

At last he turned to me, saying:

"I do not know where you obtained these from, but from both a paleographic and historical view they are of great value. All of them have at some time or other been abstracted from the Italian state archives in Venice. The earliest is this," and he spread out before me the largest of the parchment rolls—a piece about five inches in width and seven in length, square at the top, but cut in a wavy manner at the bottom.

It was headed—

"DIE XIV. DECEMBRIS, 1527.

Not without difficulty he succeeded in deciphering the whole document. It was the actual recipe for making the secret poison used by the Council of Ten of Venice.

One passage ran: "The powder if inhaled from certain flowers—the tuberose especially—or if placed upon the lining of the cap, will cause death. Its first successful trial was made at the order of the council, by one Babon de Naldo, upon the Duc de Bourbon. It was in that case placed upon a bunch of tuberoses handed to him by his little daughter.

"So potent is it that the greatest care should be exercised by any one manufacturing it or having it in his possession."

"This," exclaimed Mr. Greaves, tapping the document with his skinny forefinger, "is the first time that the actual formula of the secret and terrible poison of the Council of Ten has come to light. It is a most important document, and certainly most dangerous if in unscrupulous hands. Wherever did you obtain it? I am most interested to know."

"At present that is a confidential matter," I said. "I am not yet at liberty to inform you."

He therefore turned to the second document, which, smaller than the first, was written in darker ink, in a rather bolder, heavier and more ornate hand.

"This, you will observe," pointed out the old gentleman, "is an actual record of a sitting of the Council of Ten on May 3 in the year 1527 in reference to the offer of a certain person called Babon de Naldo to poison the Duke of Bourbon—the crime recorded is the previous document. Most extraordinary!" he exclaimed. "There is absolutely no doubt about their genuineness. I made studies in the state archives at Venice during two years for the history of the doges which I am now writing; therefore, I am well acquainted with their form and characteristics. They could never be imitated."

"Not by a clever forger?"

"Impossible! The ink, the handwriting, the contractions, the age of the parchment and the gloss upon its back are all too perfect. My eye would detect a fraud in an instant," he declared. "No, sir, these are most important, extraordinary and hitherto unknown documents, wherever you obtained them. I beg you will allow me to take copies to include in my history of the administration of Andrea Gritti, who was doge from 1523 to 1538, and some of whose original records are now in our British Museup."

"I will give you an answer in a few days," I said. "But what is the nature of this third parchment?"

"It is a letter, as you see, for it has been folded square at one time or other—a dispatch from his excellency Pier Antonio Marioni, charge d'affaires of the republic of Venice in Florence, addressed to the inquisitors of the state."

The old expert in medieval manuscripts sat in silence staring at the dispatch spread on the blotting pad before him.

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